

Date: Mon, 12 Apr 1999 11:29:17 -0600 (MDT)  
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To: Harold Varmus <Harold\_Varmus@nih.gov>, varmus@nih.gov,  
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Subject: E-Biomed  
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Dear Harold, Pat and David,

I've now had a chance to read and consider the draft proposal that Harold sent, and I find your ideas about electronic publishing and communication to be exciting and timely. I will write a longer response when I find the time, and look forward to more discussions wearing my HHMI hat.

However, I thought I should write immediately because I believe I've identified a strategic error in your plans, a "justification" that is unnecessary but is certain to organize major opposition! This is the point about "saving large sums of public and private money" (p. 1), the section about "eliminating the profits currently earned by some publishers", and the whole section about "What would happen to existing journals". I think you need to have confidence that your proposal is important to scientists and worthy of exploration INDEPENDENT of whether it puts existing journals out of business or not (which it will NOT, in the short run).

When Ben Lewin announced Molecular Cell, did he talk about its likely effect on other journals? Of course not. He wrote a page describing the purpose and rationale of the new journal, and invited authors to submit articles. The announcement was POSITIVE. What went on in his head, or yours with respect to E-biomed, is another matter, but you will GENERATE enemies if you write about "reducing or eliminating the profits currently earned by some publishers." AND ITS UNLIKELY TO BE TRUE! Even if these journals see their submissions fall by 50%, they can compensate by lowering their standards for publication, or by publishing fewer pages per year -- which would INCREASE their profits unless libraries stopped subscribing. And libraries will not stop subscribing to J. Mol. Biol. or Chemistry & Biology or Nucleic Acids Research or Plant Cell just because some papers that previously went to these journals now go to E-Biomed; it is naive to think that 90% of the world's scientists will switch their publication practices within 5 or 10 years. And even if E-Biomed is outrageously successful, and many traditional journals go out of business in 10 years, speculating on this will only hurt your cause.

IN SHORT, THE ESSAY COMES ACROSS AS IF THE AUTHORS THINK THEY ARE IN CONTROL OF THE ENTIRE SCIENTIFIC PUBLICATION SYSTEM!!!! SORRY TO BE SO BLUNT, BUT I'M CONCERNED ABOUT THE FALLOUT IF THIS IS PUBLISHED AS IS.

I have many other comments, both positive and to give alternative ideas, which I'll share soon. The main one is an alternative to your "unreviewed general repository" idea that I think will save time, improve quality, and meet the same goal without resorting to the "two friends of mine agree"



solution.

All the best,

Tom